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CHILD WELFARE WIELDS LITTLE POLITICAL CLOUT

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21-27 minutes

Politicians rarely go to bat for child welfare system Pennsylvania has more children than bakeries. Yet in Harrisburg there are two political action committees lobbying on behalf of bakeries. There are no PACs for children.

The voice for children isn't much stronger in Washington, D.C. KidsPAC, the only national political action committee for children, is dwarfed by battalions of PACs on Capitol Hill for big business and foreign countries. The auto and steel industries raised millions of dollars to lobby high-powered congressmen for tax breaks and trade barriers last year, while KidsPAC collected $350,000 in attempts to steer politicians toward children's issues.

In political terms, $350,000 is peanuts. It does not buy a lot of influence, especially considering the broad range of children's issues that need attention. In contrast, the National Rifle Association raised nearly $900,000 in the 1986 election cycle for its agenda.

Children's issues, with the exception of day care and education, have not received the swell of media attention or strong special

interest support that pushes issues into the mainstream and forces political action. The bipartisan leaderships in Congress and the Pennsylvania Legislature have not tackled the problems of abused children, homeless children, poor children and children growing up in broken families.

Moreover, improving the child welfare system, a $5 billion monster of unconnected, poorly designed programs, becomes an issue like clean air - every politician is publicly for it but few are pushing better laws through Congress and state legislatures. In interviews with state and federal politicians, only a handful offered specific suggestions on how to improve child welfare.

"The system becomes overwhelming," said MaryLee Allen, director of the Children's Defense Fund in Washington. "And for the most part politicians don't tackle an issue they don't feel like they can help."

David S. Liederman, executive director of the Child Welfare League of America, said: "When you get to the specifics like how to fix the foster care system or how to deal with teen pregnancy or children suicide, I think it is these things that are not being addressed."

The federal Child Welfare Act of 1980 seeks to keep the family together and protect children by offering an arsenal of counseling services to abusive parents. The act is supposed to reduce the number of children trapped in foster care. Its intent is to cure the social ills - drugs, alcohol, violence and others - that are tearing families apart. But it failed.

It failed because Congress and many state legislatures did not appropriate the billions of dollars needed to weave a

comprehensive safety net of programs to protect children. This is evident in Pennsylvania, where last year the Department of Public Welfare underfunded county-run children and youth offices by $27 million, according a report by state Sen. Michael O'Pake, D-Berks.

Also, the American public does little to push for reform. Child welfare affects the poor, an almost silent political voice. Sixty-five percent of children in foster care across the state are also receiving federal welfare grants. In addition, many parents don't want government intrusion into the family that would accompany stronger child abuse and neglect laws. And many agencies that work with children are inept at lobbying politicians.

"The lobbying side of child welfare agencies hasn't taken shape yet, but I think people are becoming more active," said Alan Jennings, deputy director of the Community Action Committee of the Lehigh Valley. Jennings said the child welfare issue is in some ways akin to the homeless issue. Eight years ago, homelessness received little notice, but gradually through media coverage and political attention it became a national issue.

Children's issues have yet to reach that level. Last June during Pennsylvania's budget process, more than 100 child welfare advocates from across the state converged in Harrisburg to lobby for additional funding. The media were invited to attend.

"It was amazing," said Jennings. "It was the first time that child welfare advocates in Pa. got together and mobilized for one issue. It had all the trappings of a media event. But no media showed up. Less than a week later, about two dozen advocates for the homeless staged the same type of effort and the media outnumbered the homeless troops."

Elected officials and human service groups say political lip service to child welfare issues may continue until child advocates can play political hardball. Several members of the Pennsylvania General Assembly said legislators are not intentionally overlooking child welfare but instead are treating it with a more "benign" neglect because there is no pressure coming from constituents.

Traditionally, social workers have gone into the shadows and misery of child abuse and broken homes. They have stayed out of the political spotlight, feeling uncomfortable lobbying for programs. "But they're going to have to learn how to play the political game," said state Rep. Allen Kukovich, D- Westmoreland.

Paul DiLorenzo, executive director for the Support Center for Child Advocates in Philadelphia, said when the severe problems facing children spill out of the ghetto and into the suburbs, major political and legislative efforts to repair the child welfare system will take shape.

"But it will come slowly," said DiLorenzo, "It'll be like the drug thing. When drugs moved out of the center city and into the suburbs people took notice. It'll be the same thing with child welfare."

DiLorenzo suggested that in order to attract media coverage, which he said would ultimately capture political attention, "I would like to start a body count of how many kids are without caseworkers or are in need of foster homes." The "body count," he said, should be published every day in the nation's newspapers.

The body count in Pennsylvania last year included 44 children who died of abuse and neglect. Thirteen of those children were in the custody of the Pennsylvania child welfare system.

Despite such statistics, politicians instead have supported more

popular, manageable children's issues. Consider the 1988 presidential campaign, in which day care and education became major platforms. The spotlighting of these and other children's issues have prompted New York Gov. Mario Cuomo to proclaim the 1980s as the Decade of the Child.

"More so than ever before children's issues are being highlighted" in presidential politics, said U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa.

In a recent poll conducted by KidsPac, 60 percent of Americans said that early childhood health and education programs should be fully funded despite the massive federal budget deficit. The same poll found that only 16 percent of Americans believe these programs are receiving adequate funding. In a similar poll conducted in June 1987, 70 percent of Americans said the next president should pay closer attention to children's issues.

But day care and improved education are only two elements. Beneath them is a darker world where children are beaten or neglected until their spirits are broken. Their only hope is the child welfare system.

That system is not working.

It's not working in Pennsylvania because funding and legislation have not kept pace with the growing number of child abuse and neglect cases. In the 1986-87 fiscal year, Pennsylvania's counties were forced to pay an extra $27 million collectively because of state cutbacks to child welfare programs.

During the recession in the early 1980s, former Republican Gov. Dick Thornburgh emphasized economic development. During those years the state decreased its percentage of funding to local children and youth programs.

Dave Gilgoff, director of Valley Youth House in Bethlehem, said, "In 1982, an aide to Thornburgh told me, 'We don't want to raise taxes for children and youth. We need to help businesses through tax breaks.' He was telling me that as child abuse and neglect figures were skyrocketing."

A report by the Department of Public Welfare shows that the number of reported child abuse cases in Pennsylvania jumped from 13,700 in 1981 to 20,260 last year.

Child advocates say money that could have been spent on strengthening child welfare programs during that period was instead put into a savings plan. Since 1985, the state has put more than $100 million in the Rainy Day Fund, designed to save money in case the economy goes sour. The Rainy Day Fund was politically popular while the state was underfunding child welfare by about $27 million, according to O'Pake's report.

In 1986, Democrat Robert P. Casey was elected governor and social service advocates predicted a new emphasis on children's issues. There hasn't been one. Child advocates and state representatives claim that like his predecessor, Casey is pursuing an economic development agenda that overshadows the state's commitment to social services. Under Casey, the Rainy Day Fund continues but has been reduced from $25 million to $10 million annually.

Even members of Pennsylvania's Department of Public Welfare are stymied. When asked why the governor hasn't paid more attention to children's and other social programs, Tom Jenkins, director of state child welfare services, shrugged his shoulders and gestured with an imaginary key to lock his lips.

"The governor doesn't seem overtly intent on kids issues," said Hunter Hurst of the National Center for Juvenile Justice. "It surprises a lot of people who voted for him too."

Jennings, CACLV deputy director, said: "Gov. Casey has been a disappointment for human services across the board."

John White, secretary of Pennsylvania's Department of Public Welfare, said the Casey administration is dedicated to improving the system. "Funding is up under Gov. Casey," White said. "It may not be to people's expectations, but it's up."

The administration did support an additional $20 million for child welfare programs last session. But, according to the Pennsylvania County Commissioners Association, that is far below the $50 million it claims is needed. In fact, the association last summer contemplated suing the state, claiming Harrisburg was shirking its responsibility to children.

State legislators also have been slow to act. The bipartisian leadership in the House and Senate has yet to take a significant interest in children's issues, according to social workers and politicians. Of the 137 child welfare bills introduced last session, the 11 ranking members in the House and Senate collectively co-sponsored only 13. (See related story on Pennsylvania legislation.)

"These men are fine fellows but they are not known for their leadership on human services issues," said State Sen. James C. Greenwood, R-Bucks. An aide to state Sen. Vincent Fumo, minority chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, said most ranking members don't sponsor legislation because they may have to reverse themselves during the budget process. "You can't go by the number of bills they sponsor," said the aide.

Kukovich, who is sponsoring a bill to establish a trust fund for child abuse prevention, is not surprised at the lack of funding or political commitment to children's issues. "This is the 1980s, an era of political conservatism. So governments cut taxes and that essentially hurts social service programs. No political leader is willing to talk tax increase . . . Politicians love to give children lip service."

Greenwood, a former social worker, said: "The rank-and-file state legislators generally don't get involved in children's issues. But some of us can try to fix it. We understand that the kids being abused today are tomorrow's anti-socials and criminals.

"Many politicians don't see that link. They don't understand that 80 percent of the people in prison today were abused or neglected children. And prisons end up really costing the taxpayer."

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But political indifference to child welfare issues is much broader than what exists in Pennsylvania.

Toni Oliver, director of the Family Preservation Project for the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise, and others claim child welfare programs are disjointed and elected officials aren't grasping the complexity of the issues. Critics assert that politicians aren't paying enough attention to abuse and neglect prevention programs, which keep the family intact and less of a burden on society.

This philosophy shaped the federal Child Welfare Act of 1980. The act was aimed at reforming a system that frequently dumped children into foster care while doing little to rehabilitate abusive parents. In the 1960s and 1970s, one child advocate said, the

children languished, the parents' problems intensified and the family disintegrated.

The act stresses reducing reliance on foster care by keeping families together during counseling unless children are in serious danger. The Child Welfare League of America and the Children's Defense Fund contend that to make the act work, a funding shift was needed, away from foster care and institutions and toward prevention and family counseling services.

That didn't happen. Last year, the federal government allocated $239 million for child abuse and neglect prevention programs. But it spent nearly four times more - $940 million - for foster care and out-of-home placement programs. The money continued to flow in the opposite direction of the act's intent.

Congress must bolster the Child Welfare Act with dollars, said CWLA's Liederman. "Allocating $239 million for 50 states to use on prevention programs is ridiculous. You could spend $239 million in California alone. One B-1 bomber costs $280 million," he said.

Teen pregnancy is another example. The Adolescent Family Life Act, proposed to provide services to more than 1 million pregnant teen-agers, was originally earmarked for $75 million a year when written in 1981. Funding is $9.6 million this year.

The Reagan administration has proposed $10 million for the act in 1989. The Child Welfare League of America claims at least $60 million per year should be spent.

Cuts were also made to money an unemployed family receives from two federal programs. Aid to Families with Dependent Children and food stamps are 60 percent below the poverty level in 16 states. CWLA said that measured in 1975 dollars, AFDC

benefits in 13 states, including Pennsylvania, have dropped more than $100 a month. These pressures can push parents into child abuse and neglect.

The limited money for prevention and counseling meant that comprehensive efforts to pull a family away from drug abuse, mental problems, lack of housing, unemployment and depression never materialized. Instead, social programs became, at best, a patchwork of disjointed services that continue to rely heavily on foster care.

In Lehigh County, if an abusive father is suffering from drug addiction and mental illness, he may immediately qualify for a drug rehabilitation program but may have to wait months before receiving psychiatric therapy. Social service programs, always fighting for money, often don't share their resources with other agencies. This is one reason no comprehensive child welfare system exists.

"So the abusive father kicks his drug problem," said one county caseworker. "But he still has mental problems. So not being able to cope with those he turns back to drugs and the problems of child abuse start all over again."

When the Child Welfare Act passed in 1980, President Jimmy Carter gave it his blessing, and according to child advocates, there was belief that the federal government forged a commitment to children. But that belief faded when the Reagan administration took office and weakened the act by gutting some of its regulations.

The federal Department of Health and Human Services is required to audit each state to ensure that the states are following the act by

working to keep families together rather than relying on out-of-home placements. If the states are not complying with the act the federal government is supposed to cut funding. But, child advocates say the audits aren't extensive and one of the most populous states in the nation - New York - has never been audited by HHS. New York continues to receive federal funding.

The American Civil Liberties Union is suing the federal government and several states for allegedly not complying with the Child Welfare Act. "It's astonishing to me just how much the system is not working," said Chris Hansen, associate director of ACLU's Children Rights Project. "It's crisis management at its poorest."

The ACLU is suing New York on two fronts: for providing inadequate child abuse prevention services and for allegations that caseworkers falsified paperwork to meet federal funding guidelines. Kentucky faces suits for allowing children to stay in foster care, sometimes for six years.

"There's been little direction from the federal government on how to run the Child Welfare Act," said Linda Greenan, a policy analyst for The Child Welfare League. The Reagan administration continued to cut funding and commitment to child welfare, and Congress in many instances lacked the political will to increase funding, she said. Since 1980, children's programs and other social services have lost billions in federal and state funds every year, according to statistics kept by the Child Welfare League of America and other organizations.

Title XX, which provides states with money for services for the elderly and children, also has experienced funding cuts. In 1980, Title XX programs totaled $3 billion. A year later, they were cut to

$2.4 billion and have only been restored to $2.7 billion. To keep pace with inflation, Title XX would have had to grow to $4 billion by 1988.

These cuts trickled down to local governments such as Lehigh County that have to rely increasingly on local tax dollars to run child welfare services. Berks County's child welfare office received $2.8 million in state funding in 1980 and carried a caseload of 3,200. In 1986 the office received only $2.6 million in state funds while its caseload grew to 5,800. Moreover, the funding cutbacks have forced cutbacks in prevention programs. Lehigh County's Office of Children and Youth spends only 17 percent of its $4.4 million budget on prevention. Forty-one percent of it goes to foster care.

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Funding isn't the only problem.

"The government created a $5 billion system for kids but no one ever took the time to see if it was working," said Hurst of the Center for Juvenile Justice.

It wasn't until seven years after the passage of the Child Welfare Act that Congress began examining the program. In the spring of 1987, a Select Committee on Children Youth and Families, headed by Rep. George Miller, D- Calif., began hearings.

The hearings revealed that on a national average the time children spent in foster care had dropped to 18 months, down significantly from the late 1970s when kids spent years in foster care. But the 240,000 children in foster care was higher than anytime since 1980.

Testimony revealed the Health and Human Services department as a lumbering bureaucracy. When asked how many children were in foster care nationwide, department officials responded they didn't know. The hearings also made it clear that the federal government lacked the vision and creativity to build an efficient child welfare machine devoid of glitches or lacking in parts.

Experts from several states described state child welfare systems as being underfunded and understaffed at a time when caseloads were rising. One Health and Human Services official testified that the agency did not thoroughly investigate whether states were complying with the Child Welfare Act.

The lack of federal oversight resulted in states poorly regulating locally run child welfare offices. In Pennsylvania, state regulators made little effort to investigate a child's death in 1986. Instead of visiting the scene of the death, the investigation was done over the phone.

"It's a storm warning," said Miller. "We (could) see ourselves in the middle of a crisis if this goes unabated . . . The same things are happening now that happened in the late 1970s." He added that in many areas of the country the system has not improved since the act was passed.

The debate over mainstream children's issues - day care and education - has nudged some members of Congress toward deeper child welfare issues. "It has finally dawned on some of the 50-year-old (congressmen) in this country that, 'My God, children are being deprived,' " said Hurst.

One of the harshest realities hit Washington last fall when the Committee for Economic Development, a group of blue-chip

businesses such as Procter & Gamble, reported that if children are not saved from poverty, abuse, neglect and especially the failure of the education system, America's economic future will be in turmoil. The group reported that broken families and school dropouts will result in unproductive workers and poor consumers that could cost the economy $240 billion annually.

Child advocates say they are encouraged that big business is taking a lead. They assert big business carries a lot more political clout than children's agencies.

"But I don't know how bad the economy has to get or how many businesses will go to Japan before a major investment is earmarked for comprehensively improving the child welfare system," said Tess Scannell, policy analyst for the Child Welfare League of America.

Liederman said reforming the child welfare system as a means to improving the economy is not the most altruistic approach, "but I'll take it any way I can get it."

Congress is facing some important legislation next session.

Twenty-three years after passage of the Older Americans Act, which created many new programs for the elderly, The Young Americans Act has been introduced. Child advocates said they are hoping the act will mean increased funding. This year, the Older Americans Act received $1 billion for nutritional programs, seniors centers and other projects.

The Young Americans Act is co-sponsored by Sen. Christopher Dodd, D-Conn., who many child advocates claim has the charisma and political clout to move children's issues to the top of political agendas.

Child advocates say the most important element of the proposed act is that it urges state and local agencies to work together to provide comprehensive services. Critics, however, say because it does not offer financial incentives for state and local cooperation, the act would have minimal effectiveness.

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TOMORROW:

Gov. Robert P. Casey's administration is attempting to improve the way the state oversees child welfare programs.

SUNDAY:

What can be done to improve the system.